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Women in Ophthalmology: Overcoming the Challenges

By being proactive in this competitive climate, women ophthalmologists can achieve personal goals and keenly maneuver their way through professional obstacles.

By **KAREN FALLON AND JILL MAHER**

Times are tough for health care providers, and ophthalmologists are no exception. Declining reimbursements, an influx of 75 million “baby boomer” seniors, and a shortage of new ophthalmologists demand an understanding of the “ins and outs” of practice management, and creating a strategic plan for a successful future is fast becoming an imperative. Without a strategic plan, ophthalmologists are going to feel the pressure to see more patients with less reimbursement per patient simply to “break even.” While everyone is hard-hit by an unstable economy, women physicians are particularly challenged by the downturn.

In theory, the Equal Pay Act of 1963 mandated an end to pay discrepancies based on gender. However, as reported by the U.S. Department of Labor’s Bureau of Statistics in *Highlights of Women’s Earnings in 2003*, women doctors are paid \$688 less per week than are their male counterparts. While that figure is certainly noteworthy (and likely has moved only slightly over the past several years), it should be noted that money is only one of many concerns you as a woman physician need to address to get what you want, be a successful doctor, and continue to provide great patient care.

Tips for Success

Where do you start? Historically, women have had a different definition of “success.” The defining factors usually include, but are not limited to, a balance of work and family, a successful career with the respect and trust of patients and peers, and the integration of new challenges and opportunities for both personal and professional development.

By being proactive in this competitive climate, you can achieve personal goals and keenly maneuver your way through professional obstacles. The following ideas may serve to assist you, as women ophthalmologists, in achieving and maintaining practice success in the face of this difficult economy.

Understand why women are paid less. So, why do women ophthalmologists make less money than their male

counterparts? Pay disparity statistics are influenced in part by different choices and values men and women consider in their careers. Many women devote a substantial amount of their career path time to families and parenting (sometimes called the “mommy track”), and some opt to work part-time while raising a family. In addition to seeking balance between career and family, the mommy track often includes time off to give birth, thus putting many women at a disadvantage in an established practice partnership. Accordingly, men may be more willing to travel or relocate, take less time off, and work more hours per week than women.

A number of women ophthalmologists are choosing to work as employees of a practice or institution to alleviate the demands of being “on call” or taking on the responsibility of ownership. These career options limit income potential, as most earnings come from a fixed salary and nominal bonus based on varying factors. In many cases, increases in income are the result of minimal cost-of-living increases rather than significant increases in patient encounters or revenue rate per encounter.

However, in many instances, women physicians *are* business owners and/or partners of a practice. As such, they get paid after all expenses—overhead, payroll, and other operating costs—are paid. The money “left over” becomes the net income for physician owners. Using this awareness as a focal point can empower women ophthalmologists to fully understand practice finance and create a personal strategic plan that increases revenue and decreases overhead in a way that will meet financial and professional goals.

Learn the art of negotiation. Oftentimes we speak to female ophthalmologists who have learned the hard way that they are making less money than their male counterparts, because they did not negotiate their salary, schedule, or other needs *in the first place*. Too often, women enter into a profession expecting to just “fit in,” tending to feel they will be rewarded solely on their innate skills, which has been proven unsuccessful time and time again.

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In a practice environment, there are many areas up for negotiation: salaries, flexible schedules, managed care contracts, on-call schedules, practice purchases, and meeting agendas, to name a few. *Do not be afraid to ask for what you want.* Do some research in advance and have your facts and arguments ready. Practice your negotiation skills out loud with your family members or in front of a mirror. You might be surprised what you receive when you really negotiate. Negotiation can be difficult and uncomfortable. However, if you have the necessary information to back up what you are requesting and neutralize the emotional aspect of the process, you can get what you want.

When going into a negotiation setting, *be confident.* Regardless of your goals as a part-time employee or a full-time physician owner, you have the power to have what you want in a world where men still seem to dominate. Regard yourself as an equal. You deserve recognition for your efforts, ideas, and achievements. Remember: you excelled in medical school while facing many challenges unique to women and learned to overcome them. Perhaps you won scholarships or graduated with honors. Let these and your other achievements empower your contract negotiations.

Assert your needs. Communication issues tend to be the root of all breakdowns in partnerships. If communication challenges can be overcome to spotlight the best interests of the practice and its employees, it'll be a win-win situation for all. As female consultants, we know that honest and fair communication on the physician/management level just might improve the practice as a whole.

We often hear women say they have asked for something within the practice and not received it, such as weekly staff or physician meetings, production numbers, technician support staff, new equipment, etc. We encourage you to *assert your needs with confidence.* You deserve the time required to discuss practice issues, and the practice will benefit from the exchange. If you find this difficult to achieve in your environment, put together an agenda of topics of discussion. Presenting potential outcomes for what you are proposing will help you get what you need and simultaneously benefit the team. Let others know what you are worth to yourself, the patient, and the practice.

Eliminate guilt. A woman typically experiences more guilt than a man when attempting to balance a professional life with child rearing. We understand but want to convince you to *get over it!* Guilt can be debilitating and unsettling and can undermine your self-confidence. You

put yourself at a disadvantage with guilt, perhaps in feeling intimidated by your male peers' full-time efforts or by always trying to "catch up" due to seemingly too few hours in the work day. Maybe you are concerned you are letting your patients down with too little quality time during office visits. As consultants, we see two ways to alleviate this guilt and its accompanying problems:

1) Work with other physicians who are in a similar stage of life or who are at least empathetic to the challenges you face. Communicate your needs outright to your staff and your fellow physicians. For example, if you find it too difficult to begin seeing patients at 8:30 a.m. because you need to drop off the kids at school when your husband is out of town for work, adjust your start time to 9:00 instead. Empower yourself with assertive action, and reduce your stress by assuming responsibility for your decisions.

2) Be creative so that you are still able to see the same number of patients and provide the same great quality of care. Reduce your hours if necessary, but find ways to see more patients in less amount of time by adding a technician or a scribe to help support your efforts. That way you will not feel you are cutting corners or neglecting your patients.

Remember to always keep the best interest of the practice in mind when asserting your own needs. Feeling frantic from a schedule that is too tight reduces the quality of care you give your patients *and* your family. Being able to relax and enjoy both clinic time with patients and time spent with your family makes your efforts worthwhile and helps you achieve your objective of balancing work and family.

Know your professional and personal goals. Having a comprehensive strategy *and* a tactical day-to-day plan is crucial for capitalizing on opportunities and minimizing the challenges facing women eye care providers in today's professional environment. Organizing yourself at the outset by detailing your goals and setting forth a plan of action will serve to create an efficient and effective strategy. This means knowing your personal and professional goals, evaluating your practice strengths and weaknesses, having a thorough awareness of your competition, and putting carefully calculated measures in place to ensure the continued health and success of your practice and your career.

Ask yourself the same tough yet truly meaningful questions everyone has to ask and answer at some point in his or her career journey. Make sure you carefully con-

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sider the following questions—and your answers—as you design your personal and professional strategies:

- *What are your professional goals and objectives? Have you communicated them clearly?*
- *Have you created a five-year plan for your life and your practice? A ten-year plan?*
- *Are your personal and professional strategies compatible? Do you need to give up something professionally in order to keep a work/life/family balance?*
- *What makes you happy? Are you working to create that?*
- *What do you require to run your own life?*
- *What can you do differently to maximize results in the limited hours you have during the day?*

Your answers will lay the foundation for all of your decisions. Make sure you engage others who might be directly impacted by your choices (husband, significant other, etc.) or trusted advisors whose input you value (mentor, teacher, husband, etc.).

Maximize your business acumen.

Developing a viable individual business success plan is critical. Having at least a sound understanding of the basics of business is important for all doctors and those in practice leadership positions, especially women.

Have your office manager provide you with production numbers on a monthly basis so you can plan accordingly. Also, gather industry financial benchmarks for analysis and compare your practice to other, similar practices.

Utilize your resources. The American Academy of Ophthalmology (AAO), the Medical Group Management Association (MGMA), and Allergan Access[®] consistently update relevant benchmarks, such as revenue rate per encounter, number of encounters per physician, revenue per ophthalmologist, and percent of overhead, to name a few. Familiarize yourself with these numbers so that you, as a female ophthalmologist in the workplace, know where you have control. Understanding how your numbers compare to industry-established benchmarks will give you the information you need in a negotiation setting. This also gives you an excellent platform for business decisions and allows your influence to be felt throughout the practice.

Realize the power of networking. Seize every opportunity to listen to men interact with each other. Usually you'll hear them discussing cases, business issues, and solutions to issues confronting them, whereas women often discuss family and other personal issues. While

women are natural networkers, they generally do not take advantage of the same opportunities as men, possibly due to a fear of being perceived as insincere or manipulative.

Taking the opportunity to engage in the conversation men are having with each other may be a great exercise in overcoming your fears. You may discover ways to challenge your intimidation by men through utilizing your feminine qualities, such as listening, offering new perspectives, and providing balance to controversy. By adopting a leadership role here, you will be helping to change the tide for women in ophthalmology and business in general. Additionally, finding serious-minded colleagues, mentors, and business contacts (regardless of gender) will help provide meaningful professional resources and support.

Be a leader and role model. Do the women in your practice relate to you as a woman as well as a doctor? Do they admire the qualities you bring to the practice? Perhaps they confide in you more easily as a result of your caring demeanor. Research shows women are favored for their reassuring bedside manner. Having a female presence in a practice,

especially at the leadership level, can foster teamwork and enhance the overall patient experience. Be a role model for all the women on staff and take pride in your leadership role. Exerting your leadership in this area will be valued and rewarded by your patients' satisfaction and the respect of your peers.

Challenges and Opportunities

The thought that a person must work harder and longer for career advancement is not necessarily true, and if you follow the tips for success in this article, the journey and its challenges may make it easier to take advantage of opportunities as they arise. The expected Medicare decreases, impending hordes of "baby boomer" seniors, and shortage of ophthalmologists mentioned above can serve as *motivators* for an enhanced practice and a personal strategy that is both proactive and innovative. Whether you intend to steer your career toward ownership or decide to work on a part-time basis, it is important to be involved in matters of practice finance and other practice operations to stay competitive within the industry and to use your business savvy to showcase your talents and contributions. By keeping your objectives clear and your confidence strong, you will be well on your way to improving the efficiency of your practice and your life.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

Below are several resources you might find helpful:

- www.bsmconsulting.com
Allergan Access[®]
Username: WIO
Password: agnmd
- www.corcoranccg.com
- www.aao.org
- www.asoa.org

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